

III. SUMMARY OF INTERPRETIVE THEMES

The 1987 State Parks Act defines the purposes of the state parks system. It establishes that:

The state of North Carolina offers unique archaeological, geologic, biologic, scenic and recreation resources. These resources are part of the heritage of the people of this State. The heritage of a people should be preserved and managed by those people for their use and for the use of their visitors and descendants.

It further provides that:

Park lands are to be used by the people of this State and their visitors in order to promote understanding of and pride in the natural heritage of this State.

One of the best methods of meeting these purposes is through environmental education. The definition of environmental education as set forth in *The North Carolina Environmental Education Plan* is given below.

Environmental Education is an active process that increases awareness, knowledge and skills that result in understanding, commitment, informed decisions and constructive action to ensure stewardship of all interdependent parts of the earth's environment.

Cliffs of the Neuse State Park protects unique geologic and biologic resources, yet these resources are subtle and not immediately apparent to the average park visitor. Using environmental education techniques, the park staff works to increase the visitors' awareness and appreciation of these resources, and ultimately to gain their commitment to preserve these resources for future generations. The Neuse River, which borders the park and shapes the cliffs that give the park its name, has been a political battleground for many years. Competing interest groups use the Neuse and disagree about how to manage the water quality in the Neuse River basin. Again, the park staff employs techniques from environmental education to present a balanced approach in educating students and other visitors about these and other environmental conservation issues.

Cliffs of the Neuse State Park has three primary themes and ten secondary themes. In priority order, the primary themes are the geologic history of the cliffs, diverse natural communities within the park, and water quality issues.

PRIMARY INTERPRETIVE THEMES

The Cliffs: A Window into the Geologic Past

The main feature of the park is the multi-layered cliffs along the banks of the Neuse River just north of Seven Springs. The steep, colorful cliffs are not only an important scenic resource, but they are also a valuable educational resource that provides visitors with a view back through

time. Most of the exposed cliff layers belong to the Black Creek Formation, which was deposited during the late Cretaceous period more than 65 million years ago. The cliffs present a challenge to park interpreters because they are fragile and difficult to view from overlooks in the park. Therefore, exhibits and creative programming techniques must be used to make the cliffs and their geologic history come alive for park visitors. Activities from the park's EELE help students learn how geologists and paleontologists use observations of landforms and fossils to create a picture of the local geography, climate and life forms of the Cretaceous period. The park museum provides models and dioramas that further illustrate this geologic age. Other park programs and museum exhibits demonstrate the geologic processes that formed the cliffs and continue to shape them today.

Diverse Natural Communities Representing Three Regions of the State

The park supports a diversity of flora and fauna within seven natural communities. River margins, flood plains, rolling uplands and ravines are home to an unusual mixture of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. Within a relatively small area, visitors are able to see plants and animals typical of the three regions of the state: coast, piedmont and mountains. Programs and exhibits in this theme area help visitors appreciate the biodiversity within the park and encourage them to work with park staff to protect and preserve it. The herbarium collection now housed in the museum at the park needs updating to better illustrate this theme.

Aquatic Habitats in the Park and Water Quality Issues

Currently, the park has at least four different types of aquatic habitats: the Neuse River and its floodplain, two small creeks, a manmade lake, and a wetland area that was formerly Crumpler Pond. If more acreage is acquired, the park may protect additional types of aquatic habitats, perhaps even one of the mineral springs for which the area is famous. These different habitats represent a valuable educational resource for school groups and others to study water quality and related environmental issues. The water quality problems within the Neuse River basin have been widely reported and are of interest to many park visitors. In the future, park-sponsored canoe trips down the river could incorporate water quality investigations and presentations of various aspects of water quality issues. Educating citizens about water quality is a priority within the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

SECONDARY INTERPRETIVE THEMES

Secondary themes for the park support and embellish the primary themes, and are listed below.

- History of the Seven Springs
- Civil War History Related to the Park
- Native American Use of the River
- Additional Cultural History Topics
- Water Safety
- Seasonal Wildlife Programs
- Seasonal Plant Programs

- Fossils and Prehistoric Life
- Boat/ Float trips on the Neuse River
- Current Environmental Issues

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